**Meeting of the Working Group on Monitoring and Assessment**

*(On-line, March 11, 2024)*

On March 11, 2024, the Working Group on Monitoring and Assessment (WGMA) held an on-line meeting. The meeting was attended by the WGMA members earlier nominated by the Caspian littoral states in due course and chaired by WGMA Chairperson Mr. Alexander Postnov. Also attending the WGMA meeting as an observer was a representative of the Coordinating Committee on Hydrometeorology of the Caspian Sea (CASPCOM) pursuant to the Memorandum of Understanding between the Tehran Convention and CASPCOM as of 2014. The list of participants is enclosed to the report.

The Chair opened the meeting and reminded the WGMA members that a key recommendation of the previous WGMA meeting on November 7, 2023, was to draft a Caspian Sea Monitoring Programme (EMP) Phase I, which would be based on EMP-2012 but take into account the present monitoring capabilities of the Caspian littoral states in order to start *de facto* regional monitoring cooperation. The full implementation of the EMP, welcomed at the COP4 will be carried out in the future taking into consideration the monitoring capacities of the Caspian littoral states. To proceed with this recommendation most effectively, it was advisable to coordinate and seek agreement on the structure (contents) of the Programme and key principles which it should contain. To this end, the meeting was invited to review and agree upon the title of the Programme and subheadings and main features of the Programme’s sections (chapters).

The Chair suggested to retain the title of the EMP as it had been welcomed by COP4 (Moscow, December 2012) with a reference to Phase I, namely “Unified, Integrated, and Affordable Caspian Environment Monitoring Programme among Contracting Parties to the Tehran Convention - EMP, Phase I”. The participants however indicated that the title of the programme should correspond to that already provided by Article 1 of the draft Protocol on Monitoring, Assessment and Data Exchange, namely “Environmental Monitoring Programme of the Caspian Sea” while Phase I should be mentioned within the text of the Programme.

As proposed by the Chair, the EMP Introduction was agreed to cite Article 19 of the Tehran Convention stipulating the main commitments of the Contracting Parties regarding marine environmental monitoring and assessment. It would further refer to the Caspian Sea Monitoring Programme (EMP) welcomed by COP4 (Moscow, December 2012) emphasizing that it had not been implemented because of the insufficient monitoring potential of the Caspian littoral states and that the present EMP was a simplified version of the initial EMP which takes into account the existing monitoring capabilities and thus might be feasible to implement by the Caspian littoral states. The development and implementation of the EMP to Phase II would be expected in future, as soon as the littoral states attain the necessary technical potential and degree of capacity.

It was decided to postpone discussing sections “Objectives” and “Rationale” until an exact wording of these sections will be provided.

The participants confirmed the recommendation by the WGMA meeting of November 7, 2023, that the EMP would cover only water media with the following parameters being obligatory to observe by all Parties: Temperature, Salinity, pH, NO2, NH4, Total Phosphorus, O2, Total Hydrocarbons, Fe. The Parties would still be encouraged to observe and report any optional parameters in addition to the obligatory ones.

The template table “Geographical Coverage, Station Locations and Frequency of Observations” summarizing the metadata on the nationally maintained monitoring stations which the Parties were prepared to include into a Regional Monitoring Network (RMN) under EMP, was agreed upon. The participants acknowledged that the metadata on the stations as of the end of 2023 in accordance with the template had been already provided to the Secretariat by the Parties.

The meeting agreed to the necessity to develop common regional guidelines for monitoring procedures which could ensure comparability of the derived environmental information across the Caspian region. Such common regional guidelines on monitoring could, inter alia, include a set of laboratory quality assurance procedures as well as minimum data quality control procedures which were to be applied to the monitoring data at the national level. Those regional guidelines shall be applicable primarily to the monitoring activities related to the Tehran Convention implementation and shall be harmonized to the maximum extent with the national practices and not be supreme to them in domestic activities.

The participants, however, took note that developing and coordinating such common guidelines among the Tehran Convention Parties would take much time thus hindering implementation of any regional EMP. For that reason, it was found advisable that in implementing Phase I of the EMP the Parties could follow their respective national practices provided that the other Parties are informed of them. The common guidelines for monitoring procedures would be developed and coordinated in parallel to the EMP Phase I implementation and would take effect at later stages of the activity.

The meeting adopted the template table “National Responsible Body/Bodies for Data Management and Reporting under the Caspian EMP”.

The participants acknowledged that in the context of the negotiations on the draft Protocol on Monitoring, Assessment and Data Exchange the agreement was reached on the data exchange. Thus, it became essential to agree on the format and exact procedures for such an exchange. The Excel Electronic Tables were adopted as a tool for the data reporting and exchange. As to the format of the data exchange, the meeting invited Mr. Alexander Korshenko (Russian Federation) to present the draft format(s) based on his experience gained from the data exchange activities within Helsinki and Bucharest Conventions at the next WGMA meeting.

Further on, the participants expressed their expert opinions on the possible procedures for the data exchange and use, including possible access by the Parties to the data collected by the other Parties. The participants also discussed a possible development of information materials based on the exchanged data. The general attitude was positive, but Iran expressed concern regarding the ways in which these data could be used by other Parties. Reacting to that, the Chair expressed the view that there could be legal limitations to such data use codified in the Protocol on Monitoring, Assessment and Information Exchange which is currently under negotiations. In this respect, he requested the participants to bring the necessity of establishing the data reporting and exchange procedures to the attention of their respective Protocol negotiators.

In wrapping up, the Chair summarized the discussion and informed that the final meeting report would be agreed upon by correspondence as had been made earlier. He thanked the participants and interpreters for their work and expressed hope that the next WGMA meeting would be in a position of reviewing the first draft of the new EMP.